

# Black Sheep Farm Health

June 2021 Newsletter



## The Field Report

The sun has made an appearance at last, and just as well as there is plenty to be getting on with!

### Lamb Treatments - are you on top of yours?

Every farm is different. Nonetheless, some challenges are universal so (nearly) every lamb will benefit from protection. These challenges include:

- Clostridial diseases (e.g. Pulpy Kidney) and Pasteurellosis: Typically the affected lambs are the fastest-growing/best in the group, and the most common clinical sign is sudden death. Lambs derive some protection from colostrum, but this quickly wanes, especially in the case of pasteurellosis: lambs can be covered from 3 weeks of age. There are a number of different clostridial vaccines available—give us a ring to discuss which is best for you if in any doubt.
- Flystrike: There are various fly products available and key considerations are (i) duration of protection required (ii) withdrawal periods (iii) cost and (iv) protection from other ectoparasites such as ticks and lice. They can be divided up between the older 'permethrins' such as 'Ectofly' and the newer 'insect growth regulators' such as 'Clik'. Controlling worms and Nematodirus will reduce fleece soiling and so help make lambs less attractive to flies. Again, if you are in any doubt as to which product will be suitable for your flock, feel free to ring us for a discussion.
- Nematodirus: whenever lambs are grazing pasture which was grazed the previous season by ewes and lambs, then Nematodirus will always be a threat. Thankfully, wormer resistance seems comparatively rare in Nematodirus so a white wormer should suffice. Although worm egg counts can help confirm infection, immature Nematodirus can cause damage before they start producing eggs and therefore a 'negative' WEC should be treated with caution. For this reason we more commonly look at grazing history and forecasting systems such as the SCOPS Nematodirus forecast which uses Met Office data to predict when Nematodirus will hatch. **At time of writing (1st June) the Nematodirus risk is very high.**



Other challenges are more context-specific:

- Other gutworms: Some older lambs may now be developing significant worm burdens. Again, grazing history and WECs are useful to determine the need to treat. Likewise, 'targeted selective treatment' whereby lambs are treated only if they are not meeting growth targets, is an innovative approach if you are tracking growth rates.
- Ticks and lice: Often farms will find they have certain pastures which predispose to these conditions. Ticks thrive in rougher vegetation, and lice may thrive in conditions which force sheep together e.g. when looking for shade in hot weather.
- Trace element deficiencies: These are very farm-specific but cobalt (VitB12), selenium and iodine are among the common deficiencies with consequences for growth, fertility and more. There are many different ways of supplementing these: drenches, boluses, short-acting injections and long-acting injections. Don't hesitate to speak to us if you're unsure what supplementation, if any, your lambs may need.

### Heifer Selection: Are you picking the best replacements?

Suckler cows need to be hardy and fertile creatures. On most farms, they ideally first calve at two years old, then have and rear a calf every year for the next ten years or so, without any assistance. We think key attributes are:

- Fertility: Retain replacements born in the first cycle and only bull heifers for six weeks. Cull empty cows when PD'ing. Freemartins should be sifted out before bulling.
- Temperament: Suckler farming does not pay danger money. Consider how your farm and family would cope if one of the team were injured or killed.
- Udder: Consider going through the current cow herd and blacklist any with poorly shaped or pendulous udders from producing replacements.

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## The Bull Breeding Soundness Examination: ‘Horizon Scanning’ for the Suckler Farmer

Originally written by Kaz for the NBA magazine

For those of you with spring calving suckler cows, you will either be awash with calves or they will be imminent. These calves represent a future income. The return may be seen by the end of the year for producers of weaned calves; for those selling more mature or finished animals, that return is even more distant. Suckled beef production is a long-term game. With that in mind, the best producers look to the future so they can note, and ward off, any obstacles to the health and profitability of their herds.

In policy circles, this is known as ‘horizon scanning’ and there are groups of academics dedicated to identifying potential threats to the existence of mankind, then weighting them by importance before attempting to formulate solutions to these catastrophes. It is a common business adage that ‘only the paranoid survive’, a principle expounded in the 1988 book of the same name by the late Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel. Finally, from a military perspective, it is to the Duke of Wellington that the quote ‘The whole art of war consists of guessing at what is on the other side of the hill.’ is often attributed.



How could this be applied to suckler enterprises? While conformation and weight of animals are significant determinants of farm revenue; the *number of animals sold* is just as, if not more, significant. This number is determined by cow conception and calf survival.

Bull fertility is a cornerstone of both. For reference, a fully fertile bull should be able to achieve a 95% pregnancy rate in a group of 40-50 cows after 9 weeks. Totally infertile bulls are very uncommon. Instead, ‘subfertile’ bulls – around 20% of the breeding bulls out there – are a common issue. Over a compact bulling period, they will get fewer cows in-calf with more calves in the second and third cycles. Later calving cows have less time to recover before bulling – leading to lower conception rates in the next year. If the bulling period is prolonged (the target being nine weeks for cows and six weeks for heifers – although the UK average is fifteen weeks), cow conception will improve as he gets more ‘bites at the cherry’. But calves born in later cycles are more less profitable for several reasons: indoors they are more likely to contract perinatal diseases due to a dirtier environment; they have less time to grow before sale and so reach lower weights; replacement heifers have less time to reach target bodyweights and puberty. Cow treatments to enhance cow fertility and calf health (e.g. scour vaccines) can wane if calving is prolonged.

So subfertile bulls compromise cow conception and calf survival, not only in the next year but in the one after that too.

The bull breeding soundness examination (BBSE) is one way the suckler farmer can ‘horizon scan’. By identifying subfertile bulls, it can protect cow conception and calf survival. Past performance is no guarantee of future success. Bulls are sexual athletes and, like any athlete, they pick up injuries, their enthusiasm can diminish, and eventually they lose their physical edge. For this reason, every stock bull should undergo a BBSE, every year.

The BBSE will give you an indication – not a guarantee but as good as you will get – that your bulls are fit for purpose. It encompasses much more than giving a thumbs-up to a semen sample – physical health and anatomy in working order are also assessed. It has its limitations: rarely can we assess libido at the BBSE, and it is only a snapshot – things can always go wrong during the bulling period. Both limitations can be remedied with sound stockmanship. The BBSE should be carried out well in advance (4-8 weeks) of intended breeding – we can advise you on the process.

- (*contd from front page*) Feet: Eliminate heifers with poor foot conformation. See also ‘Udder’: blacklist cows with bad feet from producing replacements.
- Growth: Heifers should ideally be 65% of adult bodyweight in time for bulling, although in the USA this conventional wisdom is starting to be questioned. Nonetheless, heifers should be on track to reach an appropriate size for calving.
- Pelvic area: A small % of heifers have abnormally small or misshapen pelvises, and these can be detected through pelvimetry. These can easily be combined with other tasks.

Once you have selected your replacements, remember to get vaccines and trace element supplements administered in good time before bulling. If you are considering using synchronised AI for your heifers, get in touch with Jack ASAP to discuss timings.